

# Review

**Robert Freestone, *Designing Australia's Cities: Culture, Commerce and the City Beautiful, 1900–1930*, Sydney/Abingdon: University of New South Wales Press/Routledge, 2007 pp. 325, \$49.95.**

In the last two decades Australian town planning history has become a well-worked sub-field of history bringing planning professionals and historians together in fruitful collaboration. This collaboration has been especially evident at the Urban History/Planning History conferences held biennially since 1993. A key figure in the writing of town planning history and a regular participant in the conferences is the author of this book, Robert Freestone, who has also served as President of the International Planning History Society 2002–2006. His new book, *Designing Australia's Cities*, brings together some of his previously published work and new research in planning journals of the period to provide the first fully developed analysis of the City Beautiful Movement in Australia, 'an influential chapter in the history of 20th century urban planning'. The movement highlighted 'both the possibilities and limitations of planned aesthetic interventions in the processes of urban development'. Its wide-ranging vision embraced everything 'from definitive place-making grand gestures to more humdrum improvements to the everyday environment'. But it was flawed because it failed to address issues of social welfare, transportation and land use regulation and was more concerned with 'the luxury of culture than the necessity of commerce'.

Adopting a critical not a celebratory approach, *Designing Australia's Cities* 'explores how planners and civic leaders in Australia responded to the opportunities, challenges and constraints shared with urban reformers around the world'. He addresses the cultural, economic, political, and ideological constraints blocking 'the realisation of city beautiful dreams'. This book complements Freestone's minor classic, *Model Communities*, which dealt with the Australian response to the world-wide garden city movement. While the garden city movement was suburban in focus, the city beautiful movement focused on the central business district. This new book is not as richly detailed as *Model Communities* and seeks to provide 'an initial framework' to facilitate further research at the local level.

While Freestone notes that the city beautiful idea first took modern shape in America, there was 'a global turn to civic art in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries'. In New Zealand for example the Christchurch Beautifying Association published a journal called *City Beautiful* from

1924. British politician and planning enthusiast John Burns thought that cities were 'something more than a mere cash nexus; they are places where utility, comfort, and beauty can be and ought to be combined'. Embracing more than just the monumental, the idea included street tree planting, parks and gardens, removing ugly billboards and encouraging 'civic embellishments' such as war memorials, statues and fountains. The Australian experience certainly embraced this spectrum as the chapters in this book demonstrate. The desire to fuse beauty and utility was expressed in the term 'beautility', coined by American architect-designer, Arnold Brunner. As Freestone shows, the idea 'that beauty was the product of utility came to define a central thrust of planning in many western nations in the 1920s'. But in practice city beautiful champions gave inadequate attention to utility and economy and thus they lost out to proponents of the new 'city efficient philosophy'. As Freestone nicely puts it, 'the ruling creed' became less that 'beautiful things could be useful' than 'useful things could be beautiful'.

The organisation of the book is clear and effective. After an early chapter examining the international context followed by a longer one on links with the emerging Australian town planning movement, Freestone allocates nine chapters to the Australian manifestation of the city beautiful movement in theory and practice from the 1890s to the early 1930s. Then the depression 'largely extinguished the flame of artistic planning as a core planning goal', leading to the demise, for example, of Melbourne's comprehensive metropolitan regional plan of 1929. In those decades 'city beautiful ideas were at their most popular and the planning movement was a relatively coherent mix of shared ideas and values, personalities, and institutions'. Freestone's major aim, achieved with great skill, is 'to interconnect projects large and small in a way that has never been done' to show that they were 'part of a broader social movement of historical significance in the shaping and making of Australian cities and planning'. His conclusion reflects on the revival of city beautiful ideas in the 1980s and on the legacy of the movement.

Readers will be as interested in what was proposed as in what was achieved. Examples are taken from every State and territory (Canberra was intended to be the supreme example of the city beautiful even if in practice it fell short of this ideal), but the Northern Territory and, with less justification, Tasmania are mostly neglected. Passing mention is made of the Launceston City and Suburbs Improvement Association and its work at Cataract Gorge, tree planting in Launceston, the clean up campaign and the beautification of the waterfront in Hobart and Cook's 1945 plan for Hobart. The select bibliography does list this reviewer's 1989 article on the town planning movement in Hobart 1915–1926. It might well be

that Tasmanian developments were not generally reported in the mainland-based planning journals of the period (Freestone makes one reference to the Hobart Corporation's reserves rate from *Building* in 1918). This neglect of the island State presents local researchers with the opportunity of taking up some of the issues (civic centres, public squares, parks and street beautification for example) that Freestone raises or are not covered in my 1989 article.

The judgements are informed and the writing style is clear (discordant words such as 'channelised' are rare). Freestone quotes liberally from the experts of the day, which is congenial to this reviewer and brings the ideas discussed to life. The text is reinforced by an abundance of striking, well-chosen images (120 in all), essential in a work of this kind. Any reader interested in Australian cities and plans for making them more aesthetically appealing will find much of interest in this book, which confirms Robert Freestone's status as our most challenging and prolific historian of town planning.

*Stefan Petrow*